

**ENG 592 and 593 – Thesis (6 credits total)**

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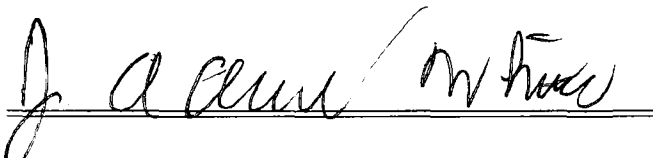
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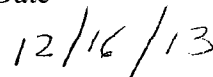
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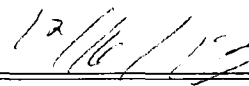
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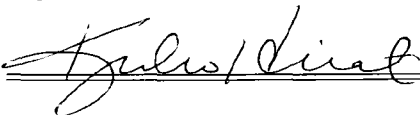
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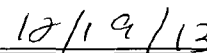
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You can't fill your cup until you empty all it has  
You can't understand what lays ahead  
If you don't understand the past  
You'll never learn to fly now  
'Til you're standing at the cliff  
And you can't truly love until you've given up on it

We are the orphans of the American dream  
So catch me if I fall  
- Rise Against, "Satellite"

To everyone:  
Who shaped my past  
And makes my present  
May my future make you proud

The great enemy of the truth is very often not the lie, deliberate, contrived and dishonest,  
but the myth, persistent, persuasive and unrealistic.

- John F. Kennedy

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## Introduction

*Wenn Mann seinen Geschichtenerzähler verliert, verliert er seine Kindheit*

- Wim Wenders, *Der Himmel über Berlin*<sup>1</sup>

*'Forget?' she screeched. 'I cannot and must not forget. Remembering is the essence of what I am. The price of forgetting, great sir, is more than you can imagine, let alone pay.*

- Thomas Pynchon, *Bleeding Edge*

In 1968 a young man from New York made a film called *Night of the Living Dead*. George A. Romero's film has been received as an important piece of American Cinematic History and was selected by the Library of Congress to be preserved in the National Film Registry. Along with the important underlying social issues of racial and gender equality, the film also brought to the collective American conscious the concept of "the living dead," or zombies as they have since been termed. Whether or not Romero should be credited with the creation of what is the prevailing mythology surrounding zombies in today's culture is irrelevant. The fact is that there is a contingent that believes he is. In his film Barbara travels with her brother from Pittsburgh to rural Pennsylvania to visit her father's grave. Shortly thereafter, she and her brother are attacked, and to put it mildly, it is Hell on Earth. What attacks them are a group of the undead monsters that we now know as zombies. In a strange, perhaps overt way zombies can act as a metaphor for the theories that will be found within these pages. Things die, but not all of them stay dead, and some of them can attack after they've been rendered to the earth.

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<sup>1</sup> If man loses his storyteller, he loses his childhood. - Wings of Desire

The problem with Postmodernism is that it can be quite difficult to define for both critics and proponents. An era that gives individuals nearly complete control over their experience is inherently difficult to define. While there may be a more comprehensive definition of what it means to be Postmodern, I will be using Fredric Jameson's wonderfully concise definition, "it is safest to grasp the concept of the postmodern as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place" (ix). So begins *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Jameson's statement is, perhaps, a postmodern addendum to 'Thesis A' in Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History," which states:

Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal connection between various moments in history. But no fact that is a cause is for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years. A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. Thus he establishes a conception of the present as the "time of the now" which is shot through with chips of Messianic time (263).

Benjamin stated that "the past carries with it the image of redemption. There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* Messianic power (254, emphasis Benjamin). In short: the present generation has the ability to redeem or criminalize the generations that came before. And as we look back at

Jameson's definition of the Postmodern, we can discern what some may see to be the problem with the current historical present.

Another definition of what it is to be Postmodern comes from French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard:

I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it. To the obsolescence of the metanarrative apparatus of legitimation corresponds, most notably, the crisis of metaphysical philosophy and of the university institution which in the past relied on it. The narrative function is losing its functors, its great heroes, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of metanarrative language elements--narrative, but also denotative, prescriptive, descriptive, and so on. Conveyed within each cloud are pragmatic valencies specific to its kind. Each of us lives at the intersection of many of these. However, we do not necessarily establish stable language combinations, and the properties of the ones we do establish are not necessarily communicable (xxiv, italics Lyotard).

The problem, if I may return to my aforementioned central metaphor, is that ideas, because of the dialectic, are like zombies: burying them doesn't guarantee that they're dead.

The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines *metanarrative* as "any narrative which is concerned with the idea of storytelling." That is to say, a story that concerns itself with stories and how people use storytelling to construct meaning in their lives.



Similarly, the OED defines *myth* as “a traditional story, usually involving supernatural beings or forces, which embodies and provides explanation for, aetiology<sup>2</sup>, or justification for something such as the early history of a society, religious belief or ritual, or a natural phenomenon.” Claude Lévi-Strauss, a French Anthropologist who wrote six volumes on the importance of mythology in society between 1964-84, *Myth and Meaning: Cracking the Code of Culture*, states that “myths get thought in man unbeknownst to him” (3). He later said, “Mythical stories are, or seem, arbitrary, meaningless, absurd, yet nevertheless they seem to reappear all over the world. A ‘fanciful’ creation of the mind in one place would be unique - you would not find the same creation in a completely different place” (12). Perhaps myths persist because there are simple truths contained within them, or perhaps they persist because they tap into one of the great Truths of human existence. But whatever the reason for their persistence it speaks to the need of a common story, a need for humanity to wrap meaning in words that have a common understanding, and this is what makes the metanarrative an important aspect of life in a society, without the metanarrative humanity has no way of filtering what it has learned and is learning through the stories being told.

In the case of the metanarrative, I believe that the novels, films and popular culture of the latter-half of the Twentieth Century and first decade of the Twenty-first have retained a strong link to the myths that were established in America during the early days of the republic. The presence of these myths in American Postmodern art, but especially Literature, presents evidence of a dialectic truth that I call the *conservation of*

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<sup>2</sup> The assignment of cause (OED)

*ideas*. Hegel's model of the dialectic posits a philosophy of history that is defined by conflict. When an idea is presented (Thesis) it is met with opposition (Antithesis) and, in time, the argument gives birth to a new idea (Synthesis). But what this model shows, in time, is that an idea never dies, because it becomes part of something new. An idea may be changed, it may be amended, and it may even be defeated, but once an idea exists it becomes a part of the collective Philosophical ether of History.

In the following pages I will be exploring some of the myths that have joined together to form the American metanarrative since the beginning of the Anglo-American republic. Using a collection of novels, I will be exploring three of these myths: The Self-Made Man; Manifest Destiny; and American Righteousness. In their Postmodern forms, these myths may have become disillusioned, turned upside-down or played for ironic effect, but through the dialectic, they are still a part of America's collective consciousness through the *Conservation of Ideas*. And as a cohesive American mythology has begun to reveal itself, the existence and form of a metanarrative can be discerned.

## **Picking Yourself Up by the Boot Straps: American Capitalism and the Self-Made Man**

It is easy to forget in America, the land of Benjamin Franklin and his endless axioms for getting ahead in the world, that not only is it physically impossible to pull oneself up by the bootstraps, but in a land (and now world) of corporate capitalism, that no one has had to. No matter what dire straits a person has come out of, and no matter what they have had to do on a personal level, they didn't have to do it on their own, not because they wouldn't, but because they couldn't. Because we can't. America's brand of capitalism has been the envy of much of the world for the past two and a half centuries, and the subject of scorn from countless others. It is the foundation of the American dream, and the backbone of many of the myths by which we continue to live our lives on a daily basis. It is, however, a system that runs on the public's money, or as it has been called in some critical circles, "Other People's Money." The money used to get ahead in this country's economic system belongs to a massive conglomerate of people who work hard and pay into a system—all hoping that one day the money they paid in will be multiplied and that the pittance they put into the communal pot will be a fortune onto which they can base their lives of leisure when the time comes to retire.

Mark Twain called the time of unbridled Capitalism in which he lived (and lost more fortunes than most of us can imagine) the "Gilded Age." But as the 19th Century gave way to the 20th the criticism by American artists of the economic system in place at that time intensified. In 1906 Upton Sinclair wrote *The Jungle*, a scathing indictment of the food industry and the way that food processing factories not only treat their food, but

also their workers. In 1920 and '22 Sinclair Lewis wrote *Main Street* and *Babbitt*, respectively. The two novels were satirical looks at members of the American Middle Class and the way in which they lived their lives counterintuitively. In 1938, at the height of the depression, John Steinbeck unleashed his most powerful novel, *Grapes of Wrath*. An American-Dustbowl retelling of Homer's *Odyssey*, the novel follows the Joad clan as they are banned from their homestead in Oklahoma and forced and accept to find any kind of shelter and work they could in California. These novels have helped define the Leftist view of American Capitalism for the past Century, but in a land where everyone believes they are a "depressed millionaire," in the words of John Steinbeck, novels by and about Socialists are not going to be the most effective means of fueling social change.

The Postmodernist novelists had a somewhat different approach in addressing Capitalism and the benefits and evils of the system. For this chapter I will be examining William Gaddis's *J R*, Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*, Thomas Pynchon's *Against the Day* and Alice McDermott's *Charming Billy*. Each of these novels address the subject of Capitalism, Corporatism, Individualism and Community in ways that are similar yet unique to the artist who is presenting the work. Gaddis presents us with the sociopathic charm of an 11 year old boy. DeLillo tells about a brilliant young Wall Street mogul, and Pynchon spans the globe to tell us about the coexistence of innovation and its patrons. Finally McDermott's novel tells the story of a man who lived his life in an immigrant community that made him strong in character but also bred in him an individualism that hurt him and his loved ones, and eventually claimed his life. These novels all have a

focus on the myth of the Self-Made Man, and *J R*, *Cosmopolis* and *Against the Day* do so through an economic focus. Through the examination of these texts, I will demonstrate the continuity of the American mythology that was laid out by one of our founding fathers, Benjamin Franklin, and further my argument for the Conservation of Ideas. In this chapter I will be discussing the three novels listed above and finding the meaning of the myth of “Picking yourself up by the bootstraps,” in order to show its deep and fundamental connection to the American capitalist economic system.

### 1. The Self-Made Man

Alice McDermott, who may be America’s greatest living female author, writes beautiful novels about the Irish-American subculture. In her novel *Charming Billy*, we see a closely knit extended family celebrating the life and mourning the loss of Billy Lynch. Billy was a beloved man who was both the life of the party and an alcoholic. As is often the case with alcoholism his family never had an issue with his problem until it became publicly apparent, “the appearance of sobriety alone good enough. Good enough” (189), at which point they found it embarrassing. The story of Billy Lynch, told through flashbacks and the storytelling of Billy’s cousin, Dennis, and Dennis’s daughter, the narrator. His story is a tragedy about the dangers of a man who tries to be great on his own, without the support of his community. It is, in fact, the antithesis of the myth of the self-made man.

Unlike Gaddis’s *J R* or DeLillo’s *Cosmopolis*, *Charming Billy* is not about a man who made himself great only to destroy himself by the very same methods that he used to

elevate himself.<sup>3</sup> McDermott's novel is about a man who was made by his community, which served as a moral compass, but in the moments when he was alone, haunted by the ghost of Eva, he was drawn to the bottle, the only way to ease his pain. Eventually the disease was brought to the light as his darkness had spread beyond the moments when he was alone. Billy's family would no longer consider him merely a sloppy drunk, but recognized that he was a problem drinker, some would even point out that alcoholism is an actual disease.

I don't believe, with a personal philosophy like "pick yourself up by the bootstraps," that Benjamin Franklin would have been prone to subscribe to the current belief that alcoholism is a disease. He almost certainly would have held a similar position to that of Dan Lynch, in the novel, who believed that it was merely a lack of self-control. After all, he and Dennis could stop after one or two why did Billy have to keep going until he got stupid?

Perhaps more important than the story that McDermott tells is the way she tells it. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari state, "A minor literature doesn't come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language" (167). McDermott, perhaps better than anyone not named Philip Roth, exemplifies Deleuze and Guattari's theory on minor literature. What McDermott and Roth do is take from their own experiences, not as individual people, but from a collective consciousness of an entire ethnic group, McDermott is an Irish Catholic woman from Brooklyn, Roth a Jewish male from Newark, New Jersey. This theory of minor literature doesn't belittle the

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<sup>3</sup> Could this be a play on Christ's warning to Peter that those who live by the sword die by it?

idea of the *conservation of ideas*; but rather, they enhance one another. Minor literature, according to Deleuze and Guattari, is born out of a necessity for the Major culture to understand the plight of the Minor culture's metanarrative. The stories are told, in fact, as a sort of metanarrative, the books and stories of the Minor literature come together to make what is the culture's metanarrative.

If we step away from a purely self-made man narrative and look at the story of the self-made man through the lens of American Capitalism, perhaps Don DeLillo's novel, *Cosmopolis*, is the best example of what it means for a person to make himself. DeLillo's novel focuses on Eric Parker, a 28 year old man who became a billionaire during the dotcom bubble. He is the quintessential smartest-guy-in-the-room and is married to a beautiful young heiress whom he hardly knows. Their marriage is less than perfect. They are always cordial with one another, but rarely see each other, and Eric has continued his pre-marital affairs with at least one woman we meet on this strangest of days in April of the year 2000.

Through flashbacks, we are shown parts of Parker's past. We know that whatever his business is, he built it up from the ground, started in college and never looked back. For whatever reason, Eric Parker was able to read the markets better and more efficiently than anyone else, and as he points out time and time again in a market that changes by the millisecond nearly all that matters in the year 2000 on Wall Street is speed,

"Money makes time. It used to be the other way around. Clock time accelerated the rise of capitalism. People stopped thinking about eternity.

They began to concentrate on hours, measurable hours, man-hours, using labor more efficiently.” . . .

“It’s cyber-capital that creates the future. What is the measurement called a nanosecond?”

“Ten to the minus ninth power.”

“This is what?”

“One billionth of a second,” he said.

“I understand none of this. But it tells me how rigorous we need to be in order to take adequate measure of the world around us.”

“There are zeptoseconds.”

“Good. I’m Glad.”

“Yoctoseconds. One septillionth of a second.”

“Because time is a corporate asset now. It belongs to the free market system.

The present is harder to find. It is being sucked out of the world to make way for the future of uncontrolled markets and huge investment potential. The future becomes insistent. This is why something will happen soon, maybe today,” she said looking slyly into her hands. “To correct the acceleration of time. Bring nature back to normal, more or less” (79).

The passage of time, we see, no longer belongs to us, but to the system, to the bosses, to the corporations.

*Cosmopolis* separates itself from the Self-Made man myth into an earnest postmodern novel at two levels. The first is the Marxist uprising that (written in 2003) is



an exaggerated prophecy of the Occupy Wall Street movement, the second is when Benno Levin begins to stalk and eventually assassinates Eric Parker. The former group represents a discontent with the system itself:

“You know what capitalism produces. According to Marx and Engels.”

“It’s own grave-diggers,” he said.

“But these are not the grave-diggers. This is the free market itself. These people are a fantasy generated by the market. They don’t exist outside the market. There is nowhere they can go to be outside. There is no outside” (90.)

The latter is a desperate man who is discontent with Parker, the self-made man himself. Levin kills Parker because he had been fired by Parker. Levin was in a position to be fired because he had been a teacher who quit his job and went to Wall Street during the dotcom bubble. In this way, it could be said that Levin is the personification protestors and that Parker is the system.

While it is true that Eric Parker is not as sympathetic as Billy Lynch they are both selfish men who let their vices control their lives at the expense of their families and friends, and in the end their devotion to their vices takes their lives. But they are also men who are defined by their own success—Parker’s financial success and Lynch’s personal success. And while both novels show the dangers of living on an island, they both show the heights to which that life can bring you before the inevitable crash.

## 2. Capitalism

In 2007, American filmmaker Paul Thomas Anderson released what many believe to be his masterpiece, *There Will be Blood*. The film, anchored by a powerful

performance by Daniel Day-Lewis, is about the Dichotomy that has defined the American Republic since the Puritans landed on Plymouth rock: Faith versus Greed. A silver miner, Daniel Plainview, comes to a small turn-of-the-Century California town on a new business venture: oil. Plainview ends up in the midst of controversy as the town preacher, Eli Sunday, won't let him drill if he's not a member of the congregation, setting up much of the film's drama and reminding us of the aforementioned dichotomy. It seems that although Faith, and specifically the Christian faith was a strong concept toward the nation's inception and as the nation and its brand of Capitalism developed Greed displaced Faith as the fundamental belief in America. But, to summarize Newtonian Physics: What goes up must come down.

In his most recent book, at the time of writing, *Bleeding Edge*, Thomas Pynchon uses a Zen Buddhist counselor to teach Maxine, the novel's protagonist, about the religious nature of American Capitalism. The novel takes place in 2001 and early in the novel he is telling her that the Taliban had bombed twin statues of the Buddha in Afghanistan. Later in the novel after the events of September 11, he says, "The Trade Centers were religious too. They stood for what this country worships above everything else, the market, always the holy fuckin market" (338). This explanation of the Islamic Extremist holy war, however, is not enough for Maxine, so he continues:

Do you remember that piece of footage on the local news, just as the first tower comes down, woman runs in off the street into a store, just gets the door closed behind her, and here comes this terrible black billowing, ash, debris, sweeping through the streets, gale force past the window...that was the

moment, Maxi. Not when 'everything changed.' When everything was revealed. No grad Zen illumination, but a rush of blackness and death. Showing us exactly what we've become, what we've always been. . .living on borrowed time. Getting away cheap. Never caring who's paying for it, who's starving somewhere else all jammed together so we can have cheap food, a house, a yard in the burbs...planetwide, more every day, the payback keeps gathering. And meantime the only help we get from the media is boo hoo the innocent dead. Boo fuckin hoo. You know what? All the dead are innocent. There's no uninnocent dead (339-40).

As if what Pynchon is saying through our Zen guide is that perhaps our metanarrative was never compromised. Perhaps it never so much as shifted until September 11, 2001. This was the day that the citizens of the United States of America realized that we weren't invincible, and that there are consequences for the actions taken by a nation, even if that nation is the most powerful in the world. Perhaps it is better to kill one's own idols than to have them destroyed on the world stage that is the 24 hour news cycle.

William Gaddis, perhaps, the father of the American Postmodern movement, gave in his first novel *The Recognitions* (1955) is one of the earliest examples of what would become the American Postmodern novel, and it is a direct literary ancestor of Thomas Pynchon's works. When his second novel, *J R* (1975), was published 20 years later, Gaddis won the 1976 National Book Award for. This novel follows a small group of people living on Long Island who are tied both to a school on Long Island and Wall Street in Manhattan. The novel, however, center's on the titular character, J R, an 11 year

old boy who learns a few simple and basic tenets of Corporate Capitalism while on a field trip to Wall Street. With those tenets, a few dollars, and his innate lack of conscience, he turns a handful of penny stocks and an out of work composer into an extensive paper empire that spans much of the United States and into Western Canada.

In, "Mr. Difficult," a review published by *The New Yorker*, Jonathan Franzen talks mostly about Gaddis's first novel *The Recognitions*. He also, however, writes about how far ahead of the Postmodern curve Gaddis was with his first novel. When Franzen directs the article to *J R* which was published twenty years later, he writes:

By the time the book was published, in 1975, the country's mood had caught up with him. "J R" received major and admiring review attention and won the National Book Award. The chunky paperback edition with its chunky title lettering was, like Patti Smith LPs and the "Moosewood Cookbook," a common sight in the secondhand stores and student-slum apartments of my college years. The spine of "J R" was often suspiciously uncracked, however, or a strangely low used price was pencilled inside the cover, or the bookmark, which might be a sheet of rolling paper or a Talking Heads ticket stub, could be found on page 118, or 19, or 53, because Gaddis's fiction was, if anything, more difficult than ever. "J R" is a seven-hundred-and-twenty-six-page novel consisting almost entirely of overheard voices, with nary a quotation mark, no conventional narration of any kind, no "later that same evening," no "meanwhile in New York," not a single chapter break, not even a section break, but thousands of dashes and ellipses, another cast of dozens, and a

laughably complicated plot based on Wagner's Ring and centered on a multimillion-dollar business empire owned and operated by an eleven-year-old Long Island schoolboy named J R Vansant.

I love this idea that the nation caught up. The mood caught up. The artist was ahead.

There was a prophet in Israel.

Gaddis's novel is frighteningly deft at showing the highs and lows of the stock market. In reading *J R* it is not difficult to see what the pull of the market is, but he also exposes the evils of the system without having to slap his readers with overtly didactic parables about socialism or even social justice. But when Gaddis is at his best, we see hints of the 2008 collapse and that the faults of the system have always been the same:

Stressing the vital necessity of expanded capital formation unimpeded by government restraints, Senator Broos' impassioned plea for a restoration of faith on the part of the common man in the free enterprise system as the cornerstone of those son of a bitches who still think winning's what it's all about give them a string of high p e ratios and a rising market it's all free enterprise all they howl about's government restraints interference and double taxation, all free enterprise till they wreck the whole thing they're the first ones up there with a tin cup whining for the government to bail them out with a loan guarantee so they can do it all over again (Gaddis 684).

Here we are able to see the very acts on Wall Street that led to the collapse of 2008, and the same results as the CEOs of major banking organizations were the first in line to ask President Bush for the \$700 Billion bailout that eventually was sent North, from the

coffers of the tax paying citizens, to New York from the capitol. Many of these tax paying citizens are not even involved in the stock market.

In *Cosmopolis*, DeLillo talks about the problem with the way that the stock market is currently set up:

That wants you to believe there are foreseeable trends and forces. When in fact it's all random phenomena. You apply mathematics and other disciplines, yes. But in the end you're dealing with a system that's out of control. Hysteria at high speeds, day to day, minute to minute. People in free societies don't have to fear pathology of the state. We create our own frenzy, our own mass convulsions, driven by thinking machines that we have no final authority over, The frenzy is barely noticeable most of the time. It's simply how we live (DeLillo 85).

With this assertion it seems that DeLillo in 2003 could be writing a follow-up to Gaddis's 1975 novel. In fact, I would assert that a reader would be wise to see J R Vansant in Eric Parker. They are both young financial savants, who perhaps have more knowledge in finance than they should, and in the pursuit of this particular genius have both sacrificed knowledge in other areas of their lives.

There is something fundamentally different in Pynchon's novel, *Against the Day*, than in those of Gaddis or DeLillo. The first two both made moral judgment on the Capitalist system that their novels were critiquing, with Gaddis looking ironically at the way the system works for people with no moral compass, and DeLillo using a more judgmental tone against the young billionaire who forfeits everything he has to try to

prove that he is smarter than everyone else. Pynchon is more ambivalent. His characters are Capitalists. They're Socialists. They're Anarchists. And he gives all of them a certain amount of moral ambiguity and allows the reader to decide who is in the right, who is in the wrong, or if, in the end, any of them are, in fact, right or wrong.

In this exchange we can see this dichotomy between the two economic philosophies that are competing for legitimacy in Pynchon's novel:

'You have to have some idea of the idle money out here. It can't all be endowments to the church of one's choice, mansions and yachts and dog-runs paved with gold, or what have you, can it. No, at some point that's all over with, has to be left behind . . . and still here's this huge mountain of wealth unspent, piling up higher every day, and dear oh dear, and whatever's a business man to do with it, you see.'

'Hell, send it on to me,' Ray Ipsow put in. 'Or even to somebody who really needs it, for there's sure enough of those.'

'That's not that way it works,' said Scarsdale Vibe.

'So we always hear the plutocracy complaining.'

'Out of a belief, surely fathomable, that merely to need a sum is not to deserve it.'

'Except that in times, "need" arises directly from criminal acts of the rich, so it "deserves" whatever amount of money will atone for it. Fathomable enough for you?'

'You are a socialist, sir.'

‘As anyone not insulated by wealth from cares of the day is obliged to be.

Sir’ (32).

What we see develop through this exchange of dialogue are two men, Ray Ipsow and Scarsdale Vibe, the former a Socialist, the latter a Capitalist who is funding technological studies by Edison and Tesla. The project by Edison is a highly profitable project that would provide electricity to all people but would require them to continue to pay for the service, whereas the Tesla project would allow people to get electricity from the ground, and after an initial installation would cost nothing for as much electricity as the consumer would need. He is funding the latter in hopes that he will be able to suppress it and it will never see the light of day.

There are ways in which *Against the Day* is less Postmodern than *J R* or *Cosmopolis*. Most notably, Pynchon gives voice to the Socialist movement, an element that is completely lacking in *J R* and which only surfaces for a fleeting episode in DeLillo’s odyssey across New York. In Pynchon’s novel he gives the characters philosophical arguments. He gives them Anarchist and Capitalist foils. Most importantly, he allows them to come to life, by giving them enough pages to provide life and room to breath. In many ways *Against the Day* is also the most Postmodern of the three. Consider the fact that Pynchon is the only one of these authors who gives credence to characters from all sides. He is the only one of the three to show any kind of moral ambivalence, and to allow the reader to decide for their selves which side, if any, is ultimately, in the right. In fact, in his chapter on *Against the Day*, David Cowart writes, “[o]n this score alone, the novel reaffirms its postmodern credentials. One can invoke no totalizing



philosophy of history or culture to make sense of the past” (178), which of course evokes of Jameson’s statement, “[i]t is safest to grasp the concept of the postmodern as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place” (ix).

A part of the Self-Made man philosophy which is not captured in the prevailing myth is the role of the grave-diggers, as Marx called them. The pre-revolutionary Proletarians who are merely struggling to stay alive, somewhere on Maslow’s hierarchy lower than political consciousness. These are the desperate people that are ignored in this great American myth. The other major facet of truth that this myth misses is that which I mentioned with Parker and Lynch, in our efforts to “make” ourselves, we destroy ourselves. In his essay, “The Poor and the Proletariat,” Roland Barthes writes:

Now Chaplain, in conformity with Brechts idea, shows the public its blindness by presenting at the same time a man who is blind and what it is in front of him. To see someone who does not see is the best way to be intensely aware of *what* he does not see: thus, at a Punch and Judy show, it is the children who announce to Punch what he pretends not to see. For instance, Charlie Chaplain is in a cell, pampered by the wardens, and lives there according to the ideals of the American petit-bourgeois: with legs crossed, he reads the paper under a portrait of Lincoln; but his delightfully self-satisfied posture discredits this ideal completely, so that it is no longer possible for anyone to take refuge in it without noticing the new alienation which it contains (40).

We see, eventually, that this myth, as essential as it has been in the creation of an American republic that has not only come into its own, but thrived over the past two and a half centuries, is inherently flawed. After all, not only is it physically and proverbially impossible to pick oneself up by the bootstraps, but if a person was truly able to get to some sort of height of success on their own, they would lack anyone with whom to share the experience or any subsequent experiences with, and as Barthes states they would be completely isolated within the prison cell of their own success.

### **Road to Freedom: Manifest Destiny and Cormac McCarthy**

*Are we still the good guys? he said.*

*Yes. We're still the good guys.*

*And we always will be.*

*Yes. We always will be.*

- Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*

Like all nations, America has been founded on a plethora of great and often beautiful myths. There has been one, however, that is intensely persistent: Manifest Destiny, or the myth of the empire of liberty that has justified ever-Westward expansion, from the Atlantic to the Appalachians, from the Smokeys to the Great Lakes, from the Mississippi to the Plains, and from the Rockies to the Pacific and beyond. If the narrative of American history has been a recreation of the Old Testament starting with Eden. The fall from grace through the sin of pride. Then we must see Manifest Destiny as Abraham's trip from Mesopotamia back to the Promised Land. The Westward movement has been a nearly religious devotion to the American mythos and to the exceptionalism on which America was founded and on which we will continue to win the hearts and minds of our closest neighbors, whether they be viewed as friend or foe. As the Postmodern era developed and came to take a position of prominence in the 1960s, these myths were distorted. The French theorist, Jean-François Lyotard, made the assertion that Postmodernism marked the *death* of the metanarrative. However, because of the *conservation of ideas*, these myths were merely changed rather than destroyed by the disillusionment suffered at the dawn of this new literary and philosophical epoch.

In his book, *Remapping Southern Literature: Contemporary Southern Writers and the West*, Robert Brinkmeyer begins his final section, “Regeneration Through Community,” by saying, “recent Southern writers who write about the contemporary West represent a wide cross section of Southern fiction. Despite their diverse styles and interests, almost all of these authors utilize and revise the American myth of flight westward toward freedom” (66). One of the most prominent Southern writers to take their stories West is Cormac McCarthy. While McCarthy’s first four novels, *The Orchard Keeper* (1965), *Outer Dark* (1968), *Child of God* (1973) and *Suttree* (1979), were all Southern Gothic, he is arguably more famous for his Westerns: the masterpiece, *Blood Meridian* (1985), the best-selling, critically revered haunting and elegiac Border Trilogy (1992-98) and *No Country for Old Men* (2005) which was adapted into a widely praised, Academy Award-winning film.

After his first four novels, McCarthy moved West. His landmark 1985 novel, *Blood Meridian*, opens with the kid running away,

At fourteen he runs away. He will not see again the freezing kitchenhouse in the predawn dark. The firewood, the washpots. He wanders west as far as Memphis, a solitary migrant upon that flat and pastoral landscape. Blacks in the fields, lank and stooped, their fingers spiderlike among the bolls of cotton. A shadowed agony in the garden. Against the sun’s declining figures moving in the slower dusk across a paper skyline. A lone dark husbandman pursuing mule and harrow down the rainblown bottomland toward night (4).

The imagery that McCarthy presents is clear. It is not merely the kid running from Eastern Tennessee to Texas. It is McCarthy, himself. Perhaps, at 52, he felt like he had said all he could say about the dark and violent underbelly of the South. Or perhaps he was looking for a new adventure. To tap into that greatest of American myths. As Steven Shaviro states in his essay, “The Very Life of Darkness: A Reading of *Blood Meridian*:”

Cormac McCarthy, the solitary poet of this exultation, is our greatest living author: nomadic wanderer, lucid cartographer of an inescapable delirium. In the entire range of American literature, only *Moby-Dick* bears comparison to *Blood Meridian*. Both novels are epic in scope, cosmically resonant, obsessed with open space and with language, exploring vast uncharted distances with a fantastically patient minuteness. Both manifest a sublime visionary power that is matched only by a still more ferocious irony. Both savagely explode the American dream of manifest destiny, of racial domination and endless imperial expansion (175).

Shaviro sets up an argument of Manifest Destiny in McCarthy’s novels in a very accessible way.

Perhaps, however, this move wasn’t a departure at all. Perhaps it was a conscientious move on McCarthy’s part. An historical truth that had evaded most of us. Perhaps it wasn’t the Wild West at all, it was the wild people of the East that moved West to a place with fewer laws, fewer people and more open space. As presented in the 1998 finale of the Border Trilogy, *Cities of the Plain*:

Well, he said. I think these people mostly come from Tennessee and Kentucky. Edgefield district in South Carolina. Southern Missouri. They were mountain people. They come from mountain people in the old country. They always would shoot you. It wasn't just here. They kept coming west and about the time they got here was about the time Sam Colt invented the sixshooter and it was the first time these people could afford a gun you could carry around in your belt. That's all there ever was to it. It had nothing to do with the country at all. The west. They'd of been the same it doesn't matter where they might of wound up. I've thought about it and that's the only conclusion I could ever come to (185).

In this short paragraph Cormac McCarthy deconstructs the entire myth of the Wild West. It wasn't a wild land that devolved a highly civilized people. It was a wild group of people moving from one chain of mountains to another that made a rough but neutral land into the place of legend. The home of Wyatt Earp. Doc Holiday. The OK Corral. But first, McCarthy says, it has to survive Doc, the devilish antagonist of the kid.

But despite this move west. Despite the obvious themes of Manifest Destiny, the theories on what created the legends that we know and love so much it is, perhaps, his 2006 Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Road*, which best exemplifies the American flight for freedom. It wasn't when McCarthy went West that he found the true spirit of Manifest Destiny. It was when a man and his son are forced to flee South to survive, or attempt to survive the apocalypse that he found it. The flight, nonetheless is for the sea and for freedom, thus fulfilling the American myth of Manifest Destiny and humanity's

association between water and freedom, and more importantly in the case of *The Road* civilization. The book is a simple, heartbreaking and stark novel about a nameless man and his son, “each the other’s world entire” (6), who are traveling a nameless road in a nameless place (though most assume Tennessee) fleeing the winter as they head South searching for enough warmth to survive. McCarthy describes their world as “barren, silent, godless” (4), as this man and small boy traverse the perils of the post-apocalyptic world in search of life and freedom.

For this examination, I will be defining what it means to be a Postmodern piece of literature, and examining and analyzing Cormac McCarthy’s novel, *The Road*, to show how it consistently uses classic American myths, with a focus on the myth of Manifest Destiny to delve into the collective American consciousness, and through which McCarthy is keeping a semblance of the American metanarrative alive in direct contrast to Jean-François Lyotard’s theory of the Postmodern.

*The Road* with its post-apocalyptic landscape and barren wastelands of what’s left of America after whatever tragedy has befallen her is a perfect example of Jameson’s definition of the Postmodern being the end of nature. The relationship of the father and the boy in McCarthy’s novel is the very definition of “a more fully human world” and their discussion of the world as it was, and the man’s introduction of Coca-Cola to the boy exemplifies “culture” becoming “a veritable ‘second nature.’” While the novel is, at times, on a massive scale despite its minimalistic package, it is, perhaps the small quiet moments in the story in which the loss and tragedy of the man and boy’s situation and relationship is truly shown:

Maybe he understood for the first time that to the boy he was himself an alien. A being from a planet that no longer existed. The tales of which were suspect. He could not construct for the child's pleasure the world he'd lost without constructing the loss as well and he thought perhaps the child had known this better than he. He tried to remember the dream but he could not. All that was left was the feeling of it. He thought perhaps they'd come to warn him. Of what? That he could not enkindle in the heart of the child what was ashes in his own. Even now some part of him wished they'd never found this refuge. Some part of him always wished it'd be over (153-4).

In this passage the reader can feel the man's pain. A pain that is not only caused by the loss of his wife and the world that he knew, but the pain of being from a different world entirely than his son, who is his only contact for the majority of the novel.

It would be easy for someone to say that it was not only nature that was ended with the unnamed apocalypse in the novel, that culture was also victimized. It seems that this is half true, high culture as it exists now is completely gone, this is true. However, it has been replaced by a more primitive culture: the culture of survival. And, as Jameson said, culture and second nature have become inseparable in the Postmodern era. What is also evident in this passage is the desperation growing out of an earlier passage when the man is pondering whether or not he would have the strength to end his and his son's lives if that's what the situation called for:

They lay listening. Can you do it? When the time comes? When the time comes there will be no time. Now is the time. Curse God and die. What if it



doesn't fire? It has to fire. What if it doesn't fire? Could you crush that beloved skull with a rock? Is there such a being within you of which you know nothing? Can there be? Hold him in your arms. Just so. The soul is quick. Pull him toward you. Kiss him. Quickly (114).

Note how this third person narrative suddenly becomes a second person stream of consciousness, seen beautifully in the exchange “What if it doesn't fire? It has to fire. What if it doesn't fire?” McCarthy forces himself into the man's psyche and pours onto the page all of the torment and all of the questions and all of the disillusionment he has suffered when his version of the world was destroyed. Simultaneously the man wants nothing more for his son than to live and believes it would be a monstrous thing to take the life of “this beloved,” while he also believes that it would be as monstrous for him to allow his son to live on in a world with no future of which to speak. In the end the man realizes that he just has to get through another night, he has to protect the boy, he thinks “Pull him toward you. Kiss him. Quickly.” These passages and others with the same tone are the reason that many critics focus on whether or not the end of the novel offers its readers redemption or if it just comes across as such when there is not any real redemption to be had.

Going back to the earliest days of its existence the American dichotomy has always been between religion and greed or in more esoteric terms: redemption and freedom. The Puritans came here from England in search of religious freedom, however, many merchants also came in search of natives to exploit financially. This is ultimately played out in Manifest Destiny as religion and capitalism became entwined, pioneers

headed West for redemption; Christian redemption of the savage natives or redemption of the savage west and its precious resources for economic endeavors. They also headed West for freedom; freedom to practice the kind of religion that they desired<sup>4</sup> or the freedom from the quickly industrializing North, from the growing Federal government and the freedom to monopolize a new market altogether.

It is true that redemption and freedom are not mutually exclusive concepts, but many critics get hung up on the question of redemption when examining *The Road*, and issue that Shelley Rambo addresses in her article, “Beyond Redemption.” Building off of Daniel McAdams work, *The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live By*, Rambo states that American readers and storytellers often default to a redemptive framework for their stories, and the ambiguity at the conclusion of *The Road* leaves room for many readers and scholars to look at the novel as a tale of redemption (102). She, however, ultimately suggests that we look beyond redemption as she “turn[s] to the classic Christian redemption narrative of ‘the harrowing of hell’ to examine the end of *The Road*. This account of ‘hell’ between death and life disrupts a redemptive narrative, offering, in its place, a vision of remaining and witnessing” (102). She goes to “Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar” who “directly counters the ‘harrowing of hell’ narrative by claiming there is no activity and no life in hell. The image of Christ is not the image of a living victor over the abyss of hell but, instead, the image of a dead man amidst the dead in hell” (111-2). Through this filter *The Road* takes on quite a different tone throughout the novel, but especially at the end as the boy moves on after his father’s death.

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<sup>4</sup> Perhaps best exemplified by Joseph Smith and the Mormon Church

When the reader stops looking through a redemptive filter and sees it, instead, as a story about witnessing the horrific its tone becomes more bleak, but the relationship between the man and boy becomes more powerful. Take for example, the epigraph of this chapter, a conversation between the boy and man:

Are we still the good guys? he said.

Yes. We're still the good guys.

And we always will be.

Yes. We always will be (77).

Suddenly these are not words of naïveté being juxtaposed with cynical irony, or a father's lies, in this context the man knows that he and his boy are dead. Sooner. Later. Doesn't matter. But he also knows that if he allows the boy to believe that they are still the good guys, because they're still "carrying the fire," an oft-repeated motif in McCarthy's novel that is never explained, but can be interpreted in as many right answers as are offered.

Something, however, even more drastic happens when we change our filter of one of redemption to one of the witness. When we read *The Road* as a novel of redemption it is the set up to a story about a boy who grows to be a man with nothing but the memory of his father and a new family with whom he is left to discover a whole new world. Through a redemptive filter this novel can be read as a new beginning for America. An America that can become anything that it desires as long as the children carry the fire through the darkness of the Post-Vietnam, Post-Cold War, Post-Mission Accomplished, Post-Wall Street collapse era in which we are currently living. If, however, this is a novel about witnessing, the story becomes about the man and the son becomes the future

narrator telling his long and torturous memories as he plays the role of Melville's Ishmael—the lone survivor. The man becomes Ahab, the road is Pequod and the sea is the ever-elusive white whale. The sea, in the man's mind, is paramount because it *is* freedom but the journey to it will ultimately be his end, he cannot feel the freedom he gave his life for, he can only pass it to his son and the son must survive in order to tell the story.

Ultimately, however, as much as I would like to agree with Ms. Rambo on her assessment of Mr. McCarthy's novel and as much as I would also like to believe, as an American, that this is a story of redemption, I must disagree. I believe that this is a tale of freedom, of the man and the boy's harrowing journey through the perils of the world after it has seemingly come to an end toward the sea. This is a story about Manifest Destiny and all of the greatness that can be achieved if one simply overcomes every obstacle. In this reading of the novel the story is about *both* the man and the boy, it's a story about how the man teaches his son everything that he possibly can in his time left. His love is the fire and freedom is the baton which he passes to his son at death, and it then becomes the boy's job to carry the fire on to someone else, to continue the search for freedom and to endure until he is able to pass the baton.

The woman when she saw him put her arms around him and held him. Oh, she said, I am so glad to see you. She would talk to him sometimes about God. He tried to talk to God but the best thing was to talk to his father and he did talk to him and he didn't forget. The woman said that was all right. She said that the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time.

Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery (286-7).

Here in these final paragraphs of the novel we see an ancient, almost native American or Japanese view of ancestry, one in which the boy goes to his father in spite of death to seek guidance and council. The father here does not replace God, but acts almost as the emissary that the man never had between the temporal and eternal. Finally we see the boy dealing with what never was in his lifetime and looking to push beyond into a world that is up to him and his new family to create for themselves almost as the pioneer settlers had to do when they first went West in the American narrative.

A final thought on the myth of Manifest Destiny and the old West, I would be remiss if I were to fail to mention the bloodcults in *The Road*. The bloodcults get the slightest nod near the beginning of the novel:

They pushed on together with the tarp pulled over them. The wet gray flakes twisting and falling out of nothing. Gray slush by the roadside. Black water running from under the sodden drifts of ash. No more balefires on the distant ridges. He thought the bloodcults must have all consumed one another. No one traveled this road. No roadagents, no marauders (16).

McCarthy unveils little more about these groups, but from the little we are actually shown we can gather that these bloodcults are small groups of savage men that attack other travelers in order to steal their possessions, but also to eat the people who they encounter. The hints and rumors of these people are terrifying because they haunt every encounter that the man and boy have with others. But more than that, they tap into the mythos of the savage natives of the childhood stories of the wild west. Men (and rarely women) who roam the world seeking to wreak havoc in the name of sustenance, though it also shows the need for a taming of the savage and wild world in which these stories take place. And as the novel dives further into our collective consciousness about the west it also reminds its readers of the stories that have made our nation what it is. America is a nation on a grand scale, spanning from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific, spreading the entire width of the continent (and beyond).

Jean-François Lyotard wrote, “The obsolescence of the metanarrative apparatus of legitimation corresponds, most notably, the crisis of metaphysical philosophy and the university institution which in the past relied on it. The narrative function is losing its functors, its great heroes, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal” (xxvi).

Lyotard’s work is nearly perfectly constructed with grand ideas and philosophical prose to match, but there are some flaws within his argument, two of which are right here. First, I believe that he is mistaken to believe that the metanarrative serves, simply, as a metaphysical apparatus. It is true that seems to be their primary function; however, it is also true that nationalism is and has always been a nearly religious state for humanity and if there is a physical replacement for the metaphysical then it is clearly the nation and the

national myths and stories they utilize. The other problem I have with this statement is when he says, “the narrative function is losing its functors, its great heroes, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal.” *The Road* has, literally, every single one of the functors of the metanarrative as described by Lyotard. The man is the great hero. The world itself (as well as the bloodcults, etc) are the great dangers. The journey is a great voyage and with the ultimate goals of life and freedom, the goal is on par with that of the aforementioned Ahab or even Aeneas and Odysseus. While the tome is less than 300 pages and filled with minimalistic language and stark imagery, *The Road* perfectly matches what Lyotard defines as a metanarrative.

The landscape of *The Road* surely meets the standards of what Jameson would call the Postmodern as he begins the introduction to *Postmodernism* by stating, “it is safest to grasp the concept of the postmodern as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place” (ix). When the man and boy are rummaging through the man’s childhood home McCarthy tells us, “sometimes the child would ask him questions about the world that for him was not even a memory. He thought hard how to answer. There is no past” (54). The Postmodern era has often been called the end of history, a statement that makes the postapocalyptic genre a perfect setting to explore the themes of Postmodernism. The desolation and disillusionment. The death and despair. The memories of a forgotten time, or as McCarthy asks, “On this road there are no godspoke men. They are gone and I am left and they have taken with them the world. Query: How does the never to be differ

from what never was” (32)? A question that can only be answered sufficiently with one word: hope. A rarely used but powerful tool when utilized in Postmodern literature.

Hope is a concept that, in Shelley Rambo’s terminology, goes beyond redemption. But this isn’t because it comes after redemption occurs, it’s because hope is the only thing that can get you through until redemption comes. Hope is what fueled the wagon trains West. Hope for freedom. Hope for redemption. Hope for a great nation. Hope for prosperity. Daniel McAdams said that when American adults relay their life stories they do it through a redemption filter, but I believe it would be more apt to say that the story of America is a story of hope. Hope. It is, after all, the single most compelling part of the Manifest Destiny myth. It is what drove us West. It is what drove McCarthy’s man and boy South. Hope is what keeps us alive when all seems lost. Because hope is what doesn’t allow us to give up. So if we are to be incredulous about Manifest Destiny, the greatest of our national myths, we must also be incredulous about the hope that fuels it. But have we turned our back on hope, and stories that provide it? Which, despite the despair and the bleakness, is exactly what Cormac McCarthy’s novel, *The Road*, is.



### **One Man's Terrorist...: American Righteousness**

*We will be a shining light on the hill. - Ronald Reagan*

*There's never been a true war that wasn't fought between two sets of people who were certain they were in the right. The really dangerous people believe they are doing whatever they are doing solely and only because it is without question the right thing to do. And that is what makes them dangerous. - Neil Gaiman*

On April 18, 1938 Detective Comics (now DC Comics) published a comic book called *Action Comics* #1. And whether one loves or hates the genre. Whether one loves or hates the character, with the publication of the June 1938 issue of *Action Comics* came one of the most popular, and possibly important, American cultural figures and literary icons: Superman. Superman wasn't the first superhero, that distinction belongs to a character called Mandrake the Magician, but he is the single most recognizable superhero in the American canon. Three years later, as America readied itself to enter the second world war a new superhero was introduced, and if Superman stands for Truth, Justice and the American Way, then what must a super soldier, Steve Rogers, alias, Captain America stand for?

These two characters became the archetype of the American comic book superheroes that followed, but more importantly, they laid the groundwork for the final myth that I will be talking about. For whatever reason, America has always viewed itself as a nation of the righteous. Perhaps it is a remnant of the Puritanical beliefs of the early religious communities that came across from England and Europe, the Christian principles and ideals that many of the founding fathers held dear. Perhaps it is the faith

that Americans have collectively placed in the inherent goodness of the free market system. But whatever has caused this belief, it has become one of the great myths on the American landscape.

In 2002, John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett released a book called *The Myth of the American Superhero*. The book is pretty straight forward. It posits that:

motifs of superheroic redemptive violence become significant points of departure in tracking American mythology because their predictability opens the doors to our sensibilities. . . Our concern lies with these ritualized mythic plots because they suggest important clues about the tensions, hopes, and despair concerning democracy within the current American consciousness (5).

The idea is that of the reluctant yet sometimes necessary violence of the American hero. Whether this be comic book heroes like Superman and Captain America or they be political figures such as Franklin D. Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. This, of course, is a part of our collective righteousness.

Are we the city on the hill? Or are we the dangerous people who do what we believe is right without the evidence to back it up? Can we be both? In this chapter, I will be examining *Leviathan* by Paul Auster, *American Pastoral* by Philip Roth and *Gravity's Rainbow* by Thomas Pynchon to examine the American myth of our collective righteousness to further the discussion on *The Conservation of Ideas* that we have been examining over the past several pages. These three novels show us images of heroes and violence that can be seen through this lens of reluctance that American mythology shows to be righteous. Whether they be terrorists that believe they are steering America back to

the righteous track or a hero who doesn't even know he's involved in a story, the ultimate expression of humility.

### 1. Reluctant violence

In his 1990 novel, *Mao II*, Don DeLillo writes the story of a novelist who has turned to terrorism in his disillusionment. The following year Paul Auster dedicated his novel, *Leviathan*, to Don DeLillo. His novel is somewhat in the fashion of DeLillo's novel, however, from the first line, "Six days ago, a man blew himself up by the side of the road in northern Wisconsin," (1) it is much more explosive. Auster's novel is narrated by Paul Aaron, a fictionalized version of Auster and tells the story of Aaron's best friend Benjamin Sachs, a talented writer who, after a terrible life-threatening accident, throws his life to that point out and starts over, becoming a terrorist striking against his perceptions of the American government's oversteps.

Benjamin Sachs was born on August 6, 1945. "He used to claim that the doctor had delivered him at the precise moment Fat Man was released from the bowels of the *Enola Gay*, but that always struck me as an exaggeration." We are never able to discern whether this is some personal mythologizing that Sachs has allowed himself, or if it's fact, "the one time I met Sachs's mother, she wasn't able to recall when the birth had taken place (she'd had four children, she said, and their births were all mixed up in her mind), but at least she confirmed the date, adding she distinctly remembered being told about Hiroshima *after* her son was born" (26, emphasis Auster's). Because of this bit of trivia, however, Sachs would at times refer to himself as the first child born in the nuclear

age. And, after his life spun out of control, and Sachs became a terrorist, it became less a innocuous piece of trivia than a horrific omen of what was to come of Sachs's life.

The event that Paul Aaron attributes to Sachs's transformation is a fall he took from a fire escape at a Fourth of July party in 1986 (The Centennial of receiving the Statue of Liberty). The fall was an accident that was the result of a lot maneuvering by Sachs to get Maria Turner, a woman not unfamiliar to Paul Aaron, to touch him. During Sachs's recovery he didn't speak for ten days, something we later discover was nothing more than a selfish act. But it was the recovery period that followed where we are able to see the transformation, of Sachs's most trying times, Aaron writes that Sachs's biggest problem was:

An overly refined conscience, a predisposition toward guilt in the face of his own desires, led a good man to act in curiously underhanded ways, in ways that compromised his own goodness. This is the nub of the catastrophe, I think. He accepted everyone else's frailties, but when it came to himself he demanded perfection, an almost superhuman rigor in even the smallest acts.

The result was disappointment, a dumbfounding awareness of his own flawed humanity. Which drove him to place ever more stringent demands on his conduct, which in turn led to even more suffocating disappointments (147).

In this statement it occurs to me that, perhaps Sachs is not merely the embodiment of the this reluctant perpetrator of violence. Perhaps Benjamin Sachs *is* America. Sachs is a good man. A brilliant man. A selfless man. He accepts the weaknesses and "frailties" of others. He knows that no one is perfect and that he shouldn't expect it from anyone. Yet

Sachs “demanded perfection, an almost superhuman rigor in even the smallest acts” (147). Could this be America? Has Paul Auster looked at us long enough and hard enough in the mirror to realize that this longing, this national myth of American righteousness is nothing but a mask to cover the inadequacies that we find in ourselves as a nation? That we can never hold up against the “city on the hill” that our 40th President placed upon us?

After Sachs has been through this trauma he returns to writing. Through Aaron’s narration we know little about the book, only that it is important, “this was the book I had always imagined he could write, and if it had taken a disaster to get him started, then perhaps it hadn’t been a disaster at all” (158). When Sachs fell from the fire escape something happened to him. Aaron doesn’t know what it is, so we don’t know what it is. Perhaps Sachs didn’t know what it was, but when he turned to terrorism, it is clear that the sweet, gentle and kind-hearted man that we had encountered throughout the novel to this point is gone. That his attacks were focused on the Statue of Liberty (A *leitmotif* in his first novel, *The New Colossus*) is a psychological tell into Sachs’s past and a statement that American liberty is nothing to be proud of at this point in our history, that it is gone.

If Paul Auster’s terrorist was a great novelist and charismatic communicator with a love that only hatred can express for the Statue of Liberty, then Philip Roth’s is the teeming masses that the new colossus welcomes to the golden shore. Meredith Levov is the daughter of a second generation American Jew,

The Swede. During the war years, when I was still a grade school boy, this was a magical name in our Newark neighborhood, even to adults just a generation removed from the city's old Prince Street ghetto and not yet flawlessly Americanized as to be bowled over by the prowess of a high school athlete. The name was magical; so was the anomalous face. Of the few fair-complexioned Jewish students in our preponderantly Jewish public high school, none possessed anything remotely like the steep-jawed, insentient Viking mask of the blue-eyed blond born into our tribe as Seymour Irving Levov (3).

Levov was called the Swede because of his coloring and athletic prowess and Miss New Jersey, Dawn Dwyer, an Irish Catholic girl from a nearby New Jersey town. Meredith never feels quite like she belongs with her family. The classic awkward little girl with beautiful parents. She has a stuttering problem, and lacks the confidence to communicate with her parents or the people around her. The Swede's, because ultimately it is his, story is about a man whose daughter "transports him out of the longed-for American pastoral and into everything that is its antithesis and its enemy, into the fury, violence, and the desperation of the counterpastoral—into the indigenous American berserk" (86). The novel begins nearly twenty years after Meredith bombed the local Postoffice in Rimrock. Narrated by, perhaps, Philip Roth's greatest character, Nathan Zuckerman, who grew up idolizing the Swede who was his best friend's older brother, and now that the Swede is ready, telling his story to the public.

The problems between the Swede and Meredith begin shortly before the war in Vietnam as racial tensions between the Jewish and African-American people of Newark grew. Newark had always been a predominantly Jewish city and as the 50s turned to the 60s the African-American population had caught them. As Meredith's friend, Rita, relays to Swede four months after her disappearance, "you're nothing but a shitty little capitalist who exploits the brown and yellow people of the world and lives in luxury behind the nigger-proof security gates of his mansion" (133). But as the war in Asia grew worse, Meredith watched on television as the Buddhist monk dosed himself in gasoline and set himself ablaze, she started looking for answers. This led her to meetings with older men and women, members of the Weathermen, the revolutionary branch of the Students for a Democratic Society.

The Swede was convinced that it had to do with the monk that lead Meredith to the revolutionaries,

That was what had done it. Into their home the monk came to stay, the Buddhist monk calmly sitting out his burning up as if he were a man both full alert and anesthetized. The television transmitting the immolation *must* have done it. If their set had happened to be tuned to another channel or turned off or broken, if they had all been together as a family for the evening, Merry would never have seen what she shouldn't have seen and would never have done what she shouldn't have done (154).

This scene will remind some of the opening sequences in the Ingmar Bergman masterpiece *Persona* (1966), in which Liv Ullmann has seen the image of the burning

monk and has quit speaking altogether. A powerful, and now iconic image of the war and the violently peaceful protests that some made in order to try to shock the rest out of their violence. Here again is this theme of reluctant violence. We see the monks dosing themselves in gasoline, setting themselves on fire in a violent attempt to end the violence. We see Meredith, who is influenced by this image. Who wonders if violence is, indeed, the only way to end violence, and turns to it in a desperate attempt to make a statement Stateside about the war happening in Vietnam.

Ultimately what Roth's novel is communicating is the friction between the American pastoral and the American berserk. The former, the title of the novel, is the ideal. It is the righteousness that we see in ourselves. It is the hope that we can make ourselves and everyone around us into the best possible versions of themselves through the American dream, through hard work, through American capitalism. The American pastoral is the myth that we sell and it's the impossible standard that turned Benjamin Sachs's in *Leviathan* into terrorism in the first place. But if the American pastoral is the myth, that means that the American berserk is the reality. Which is exactly what Roth meant when he called it the "indigenous American berserk." The berserk is the chaos sown with greed and nurtured with religious fervor. It's the dichotomy of faith and power. It's the blaming of the Western landscape for the "Wild West" rather than the people who inhabited it. But, ultimately, the American berserk is the result of trying to create the American pastoral, and sanctify the American righteousness through violence. The American berserk, in other words, is not the antithesis, as Roth suggests, of the American



pastoral. Rather it is the result of attempting to garner the pastoral through violence and greed.

## 2. Clueless heroes

It is not hard for me to admit to the intellectual superiority of America's greatest living author, Thomas Pynchon. His novels are labyrinthine, long, complex, full of scientific imagery that I have to find diagrams to understand. Pynchon has a handle on language, foreign and domestic that would make most Linguists envious. There is no doubt that by Jonathan Franzen's standards that Thomas Pynchon follows, perhaps only, William Gaddis in relative difficulty. The difference between the two, however, are the characters drawn by the two. Gaddis draws dark, cynical characters that cannot stand the status quo, who are revolutionary, but also who cannot stand to do a whole lot about their disdain. On the other hand, Pynchon draws characters who are paranoid, drug addled, mischievous, depraved and yet somehow lovable and relatable. But of all the characters (literally hundreds) between his eight novels there are two that stand above the rest: Oedipa Maas from *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) and Lt. Tyrone Slothrop from *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973).

Much like Joyce's unreadable *Finnegan's Wake*, Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* starts and ends with a continuation of the same scene, and while not the same sentence, as in the case of Joyce, it does have a blood curdling effect on its readers. As the novel begins, "A screaming comes across the sky. It has happened before, but there is nothing to compare it to now," (3) it ends with a group in the theatre that is about to be destroyed

by the incoming V-2 rocket that we read about in the beginning of the novel having a sing-a-long:

There is a Hand to turn the time,  
 Though thy Glass today be run,  
 Till the Light that hath brought the Towers low  
 Find the last poor Pret'rite one...  
 Till the Riders sleep by every road,  
 All through out crippl'd Zone,  
 With a face on every mountainside,  
 And a Soul in ev'ry stone...  
 Now everybody— (776).

It fades out. They are destroyed. As the story abruptly ends we are left with one thought: Tyrone Slothrop's map proved right one last time. Slothrop is "a Yank Casanova, Slothrop maintains a map of his sexual conquests (or sexual fantasies; this is kept ambiguous). The pins on the map coincide with—indeed, anticipate—the distribution of German V-2 rockets falling on the British capital. A Slothrop erection, that is, *precedes* the arrival of each rocket" (Cowart 11. Emphasis Cowart's).

But what, if anything, do the lecherous acts of a clueless man have to do with American righteousness? The cluelessness. If Tyrone Slothrop were going around London having sex *knowing* that the rockets would fall there shortly, it would make him the villain of the story. But the fact is that he is intrinsically linked to the destruction of the city with no hint of malice or foresight. And to save the city of London, all that must

be done is to discover the pattern and to evacuate those areas in which Slothrop is going to have an escapade. To be sure, Slothrop keeps a map with pins to mark his conquests, and Allied intelligence gets ahold of the map and realizes the pattern they are seeing is that of the rockets, but they don't know why Slothrop is mapping them, or how his map is accurate before it happens. But the code cannot be broken. Not in time.

And, in his death, Slothrop one more times shows the American righteousness, or as Cowart explains, "In a sense, Slothrop dies for the sins of the modern world, and his scattering coincides with the founding of the Counterface, an anarchic group devoted to resisting or reversing the technology of violence and death" (13).

The righteousness that America believe itself to possess is what causes the uproar over sex on television. Of profanity in the schools. A recent report on a new study showed that PG-13 rated films feature more gun violence than any other rating (NPR). But PG-13 rated films are also the most widely attended films. This taps into what Lawrence and Jewett said about reluctant violence and American superheroes. If a man is driven to this violence through external pressures, it is okay. Almost a vigilante take on Aquinas's just war theory. Perhaps that's all America actually is, a vigilante out to save the world from itself.

### **Final Thoughts**

*The one constant through all the years, Ray, has been baseball. America has rolled by like an army of steamrollers. It has been erased like a blackboard, rebuilt and erased again. But baseball has marked the time. This field, this game: it's a part of our past, Ray. It reminds of us of all that once was good and it could be again.*

- Terrance Mann, *Field of Dreams*

At the end of the 1950s and beginning of the 60s, there was something different, philosophically, happening. By the time the 1990s came, it had a name and was being discussed in academic circles. Once more, I turn to Postmodern theorist Fredric Jameson,

The last few years have been marked by an inverted millennialism in which premonitions of the future, cataclysmic or redemptive, have been replaced by senses of the end of this or that (the end of ideology, art, or social class; the “crisis” of Leninism, social democracy, or the welfare state, etc., etc.); taken together, all of these perhaps constitute what is increasingly called postmodernism (1).

It is this sense of end that Lyotard was jumping to when he said that Postmodernism marked the death of the metanarrative. It is possible that Lyotard saw that the discussion was about the end or the death of nearly everything. After all, can there be metanarrative without ideology or art? But the more theorists pushed for the end, the more the end refused to come. But, this is a critique of Lyotard. Not because he predicted wrongly, but because the dialectical patterns of history do not allow for such a death to occur as long as there is a society in which to posit such ideas.

On February 4, 1976, French philosopher, Michel Foucault gave a lecture entitled “Society Must be Defended.” The lecture is about war, and a conflict view of history, “The logical and historical need for rebellion therefore is inscribed within a whole of historical analysis that reveals war to be a permanent feature of social relations” (110). The dialectic can be used for many means to many ends. A Hegelian says that ideas fuel the course of history. Ideas show us where we have been and where we are going. A Marxist corrects that it is not ideas, but rather money and economic systems that fuel our course from the past on into the future. As a subscriber to the dialectic, I would be remiss if I were to dismiss the possibility that Marxism is the antithesis to Hegelianism and that at some point down the line there will come a synthesis of the philosophies that will allow for more materialism than Hegel and more of the metaphysical than Marx. But until that time arrives, we work in the confines afforded us and we see that, whether it be ideas or economics, the movement is the same. Once an idea has been presented and defended, it is in the philosophical ether and will remain there. If, as Foucault asserts, war is inscribed into the very fabric of our society. If humanity will never be able to escape the grasps of war because it is a permanent feature of social relations, than why are we to assume that myths, mythologies, belief systems and entire metanarratives aren’t inscribed in our DNA as well?

As I explored the canon of Postmodern American Literature, I believe that I found many clues that the American metanarrative is far from dead. In Gaddis, DeLillo, Pynchon and others I found that Capitalism is used as a beacon in this nation. Some agree with its course and want to continue on following in the course laid out before us by our founding

fathers. Some find it revolting, the idea that we can own the work of other human beings. That there are people who pull the strings but are not accountable for the production of the items that they are profiting from. In McDermott, I found that community can see us through the dark. That while Benjamin Franklin claimed to pull himself up by the bootstraps that it is dangerous business being left to one's own devices. In McCarthy I found the West. I found the life-force that has always streamed through this nation's veins as we traveled from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and I found that sometimes the only way to survive is to run, not toward the ocean, but to hope. Because, what did Manifest Destiny represent for the American people if not hope? In Auster and Roth I found that terrorists are, in their own way, freedom fighters. That sometimes, whether we negotiate with them or not, we should at least understand what it is that the terrorist is saying, perhaps they're even right. Finally I found in Pynchon that cluelessness and self-sacrifice are the only way for a perfect hero to be made. The self-sacrifice is clear. But the cluelessness is the only way for the hero to not fall into that most ancient of sins: pride.

Perhaps our world and society has fallen away from much religion. It is true that scientific thought has made it hard for some to believe in the supernatural or even the metaphysical. But to think that the metaphysical is the only factor of a nation's or a people's metanarrative is a foolish notion. After September 11, 2001, there wasn't a rise in organized religion (after the aftermath had settled) but there was a rise in national pride. In national insecurity. In national hatred. Suspicion. All of these are pulses of our nation's story and all a metanarrative is is a collection of stories that come together to create a

whole. And though a pluralist society requires more stories to create that whole, it also enriches the totality of our existence and the cohesive story that is told.

I have discussed economic systems. Philosophical mindsets. The nature of self reliance versus community. I have discussed Manifest Destiny. The trip West. The hope it represented. But perhaps, better than I ever could the 1989 film, *Field of Dreams*, discusses the idea of metanarrative. We as a nation have had many ups and downs. We've fought wars in nearly every decade of our existence on nearly every continent on Earth. But since the first game of baseball was played on June 19, 1846 in Hoboken, New Jersey the game has been a constant. It was played by Union prisoners of war in Confederate camps during the Civil War. It was played through the Great War and sent some of its all time greats to Europe in the Second World War. It was on a baseball field that the death of Disco was made official and on a field in New York City on September 21, 2001 that an American president threw out a first pitch that told a nation that it was time to start the healing process. The game of baseball has been with the American people through everything since its inception, and perhaps more than anything represents the American metanarrative.

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